

World
Watch
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Syria: Country Dossier

December 2019



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Introduction

World Watch List 2020

Rank	Country	Private life	Family life	Community life	National life	Church life	Violence	Total Score WWL 2020	Total Score WWL 2019	Total Score WWL 2018	Total Score WWL 2017	Total Score WWL 2016
1	North Korea	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	11.1	94	94	94	92	92
2	Afghanistan	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	10.0	93	94	93	89	88
3	Somalia	16.5	16.7	16.6	16.6	16.5	9.4	92	91	91	91	87
4	Libya	15.3	15.5	15.8	16.0	16.4	11.3	90	87	86	78	79
5	Pakistan	14.0	13.9	15.0	14.9	13.7	16.7	88	87	86	88	87
6	Eritrea	14.5	14.9	15.9	15.9	15.4	10.9	87	86	86	82	89
7	Sudan	14.2	14.6	14.5	15.7	16.1	10.4	85	87	87	87	84
8	Yemen	16.6	16.4	16.4	16.7	16.7	2.6	85	86	85	85	78
9	Iran	14.1	14.3	14.1	15.8	16.5	10.4	85	85	85	85	83
10	India	12.9	13.0	13.5	15.0	13.5	14.8	83	83	81	73	68
11	Syria	13.5	14.2	13.0	13.9	14.4	12.6	82	82	76	86	87
12	Nigeria	12.2	11.9	13.5	12.8	13.0	16.7	80	80	77	78	78
13	Saudi Arabia	15.1	14.9	14.1	15.5	16.5	2.4	79	77	79	76	76
14	Maldives	15.4	15.6	14.0	15.9	16.6	0.7	78	78	78	76	76
15	Iraq	14.0	14.6	13.9	14.5	13.6	5.6	76	79	86	86	90
16	Egypt	12.1	13.1	10.7	13.2	10.5	16.1	76	76	70	65	64
17	Algeria	13.5	14.3	10.4	12.8	13.2	9.3	73	70	58	58	56
18	Uzbekistan	15.1	12.9	14.1	12.2	15.7	3.0	73	74	73	71	70
19	Myanmar	11.8	11.9	13.5	12.5	12.2	10.7	73	71	65	62	62
20	Laos	12.8	9.9	14.1	14.4	14.9	5.6	72	71	67	64	58
21	Vietnam	12.3	8.5	12.9	13.6	14.5	9.8	72	70	69	71	66
22	Turkmenistan	14.5	11.2	13.8	13.3	15.7	1.9	70	69	68	67	66
23	China	11.6	8.4	11.6	12.8	15.1	10.2	70	65	57	57	57
24	Mauritania	13.9	14.0	13.0	13.7	13.4	0.2	68	67	57	55	50
25	Central African Republic	10.1	9.1	13.1	9.8	10.2	15.6	68	70	61	58	59
26	Morocco	12.4	13.3	10.8	11.7	14.1	4.1	66	63	51	49	47
27	Qatar	13.6	13.4	10.8	12.2	14.1	2.2	66	62	63	66	65
28	Burkina Faso	9.4	9.7	10.2	9.4	11.8	15.6	66	48	-	-	-
29	Mali	9.2	8.2	12.8	10.0	11.7	13.7	66	68	59	59	55
30	Sri Lanka	11.5	9.0	11.0	10.9	9.6	13.1	65	58	57	55	53
31	Tajikistan	13.9	12.3	11.9	12.4	13.1	1.1	65	65	65	58	58
32	Nepal	12.4	10.8	9.9	12.1	12.2	7.0	64	64	64	53	53
33	Jordan	13.1	14.1	10.7	11.7	12.5	1.7	64	65	66	63	59
34	Tunisia	12.0	12.8	10.3	10.8	12.3	5.4	64	63	62	61	58
35	Kazakhstan	13.2	11.5	10.7	12.4	14.0	1.7	64	63	63	56	55

36	Turkey	12.6	11.8	10.7	13.3	11.3	3.7	63	66	62	57	55
37	Brunei	13.8	14.3	10.7	10.3	13.5	0.6	63	63	64	64	61
38	Bangladesh	11.1	9.9	12.7	11.1	8.9	9.3	63	58	58	63	57
39	Ethiopia	10.0	9.2	10.6	10.8	10.4	11.9	63	65	62	64	67
40	Malaysia	12.1	14.6	12.7	12.0	9.6	1.5	62	60	65	60	58
41	Colombia	8.9	7.8	11.9	9.8	8.9	15.0	62	58	56	53	55
42	Oman	12.7	13.1	10.0	11.5	12.7	2.0	62	59	57	53	53
43	Kuwait	13.2	13.1	9.9	11.5	13.4	0.7	62	60	61	57	56
44	Kenya	11.7	10.5	10.9	8.3	10.9	9.1	61	61	62	68	68
45	Bhutan	12.8	10.9	11.8	11.6	13.9	0.0	61	64	62	61	56
46	Russian Federation	12.2	8.3	10.7	10.4	12.1	6.9	60	60	51	46	48
47	United Arab Emirates	12.9	13.0	9.5	11.1	12.6	1.1	60	58	58	55	55
48	Cameroon	8.8	7.2	11.6	7.0	10.4	15.0	60	54	38	-	45
49	Indonesia	10.9	11.1	11.6	10.2	9.5	6.5	60	65	59	55	55
50	Niger	9.4	9.5	13.3	7.2	11.1	9.3	60	52	45	47	53
51	Palestinian Territories	12.2	13.0	9.2	10.2	11.9	3.1	60	57	60	64	62
52	Mexico	8.4	6.8	12.2	10.6	10.0	11.5	60	61	59	57	56
53	Azerbaijan	13.0	10.0	9.3	11.1	12.4	1.5	57	57	57	52	57
54	Comoros	11.7	11.5	9.1	9.9	13.9	0.9	57	56	56	56	56
55	Kyrgyzstan	12.9	10.3	11.1	9.4	11.9	1.1	57	56	54	48	46
56	Djibouti	12.3	12.3	10.3	10.0	11.2	0.2	56	56	56	57	58
57	Democratic Republic of the Congo	5.6	6.7	10.6	7.4	10.4	15.6	56	55	33	-	53
58	Chad	11.5	8.2	10.2	9.6	10.3	5.9	56	48	40	-	51
59	Bahrain	12.1	12.3	9.1	10.1	10.5	0.9	55	55	57	54	54
60	Tanzania	9.3	10.8	10.3	8.6	8.7	7.0	55	52	53	59	57
61	Cuba	9.6	5.6	9.5	11.8	12.0	3.5	52	49	49	47	42
62	Uganda	8.1	4.6	6.7	6.7	9.1	13.0	48	47	46	53	45
63	Burundi	5.1	5.8	9.7	9.2	9.6	8.7	48	43	-	-	-
64	Guinea	10.3	7.5	8.3	7.0	8.1	3.7	45	46	-	-	-
65	South Sudan	5.7	1.5	7.0	6.3	7.8	15.6	44	44	-	-	-
66	Mozambique	6.9	4.6	7.1	5.2	8.0	11.7	43	43	-	-	-
67	Gambia	8.3	8.2	8.7	8.3	8.8	1.1	43	43	-	-	-
68	Angola	6.4	3.6	7.0	8.7	10.4	6.7	43	42	-	-	-
69	Venezuela	3.8	4.4	10.6	9.3	9.5	4.8	42	41	34	-	-
70	Ivory Coast	9.8	8.6	8.2	5.5	6.6	3.5	42	43	-	-	-
71	Rwanda	5.3	4.4	6.7	7.8	10.1	7.2	42	41	-	-	-
72	Nicaragua	5.8	4.2	8.5	9.8	9.0	4.1	41	41	-	-	-
73	Togo	8.6	6.7	8.5	7.1	8.4	1.1	41	42	-	-	-

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Brief note on sources and definitions

This country report is a collation of data and analysis based around Open Doors World Watch List (WWL) and includes statistical information on world religions, Christian denominations and people groups prepared by the World Christian Database (WCD). The highlighted links in the text can be found written out in full at the conclusion of each main section under the heading “External links”. The WWL 2020 reporting period was 1 November 2018 - 31 October 2019.

The definition of persecution used in WWL analysis is: “Any hostility experienced as a result of one’s identification with Christ. This can include hostile attitudes, words and actions towards Christians”.

This broad definition includes (but is not limited to) restrictions, pressure, discrimination, opposition, disinformation, injustice, intimidation, mistreatment, marginalization, oppression, intolerance, infringement, violation, ostracism, hostilities, harassment, abuse, violence, ethnic cleansing and genocide.

The latest update of WWL Methodology including appendices can be found on the [World Watch List Documentation](#) page of the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom).

WWL 2020: Persecution summary / Syria

Brief country details

Pop 2019	Christians	Chr%
Syria		
18,499,000	744,000	4.0

Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds., *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2019).

World Watch List Syria	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2020	82	11
WWL 2019	82	11
WWL 2018	76	15
WWL 2017	86	6
WWL 2016	87	5

Scores and ranks are shown above whenever the country scored 41 points or more in the WWL 2016-2020 reporting periods.

Dominant persecution engines and drivers

Syria: Main Persecution engines	Main drivers
Islamic oppression	One's own (extended) family, Violent religious groups, Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs, Non-Christian religious leaders, Ethnic group leaders, Government officials, Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups
Clan and ethnic antagonism	Ethnic group leaders, Non-Christian religious leaders, One's own (extended) family, Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs
Dictatorial paranoia	Violent religious groups, Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups, Government officials
Christian denominational protectionism	Religious leaders of other churches
Organized corruption and crime	Violent religious groups, Organized crime cartels or networks

Engines and Drivers are listed in order of strength. Only Very strong / Strong / Medium are shown here.

Brief description of persecution situation

Due to their public visibility, the leaders of historical churches are particularly targeted for abduction. But Baptist, Evangelical and Pentecostal congregations are also in a vulnerable position as they are known for their more Western orientation, fragmentation, lack of strong leadership and lack of a foreign spokesperson (e.g. a Pope or bishop) who can speak out on their behalf.

In areas controlled by radical Islamic groups, most historic churches have been either demolished or used as Islamic centers. Public expressions of Christian faith are prohibited and church buildings or monasteries cannot be repaired or restored irrespective of whether the damage was collateral or intentional. In government-controlled areas, there used to be less monitoring of Christians due to the circumstances of war but as the authorities gain in power, the control of possible dissidents and others who could harm social stability (such as converts from Islam) has also increased. The political reputation of denominations, churches and local church leaders plays an important role in the level of persecution or oppression they face from groups that are fighting President Assad.

Christians from a Muslim background are especially put under pressure by their family, as their conversion brings great dishonor to them. This is particularly true in majority Sunni areas, where converts risk being expelled from their family homes or worse. Pressure from the family is somewhat less intense in Kurdish areas, as the Kurdish Sunnis are generally less radical. Indeed, in the North Aleppo Governorate there are recognized Kurdish Christian communities.

Specific examples of persecution in the reporting period

In the chaotic circumstances of war it is often not clear whether incidents are religiously motivated or not. Motives are often mixed and include power mechanisms. However, this does not necessarily rule out anti-Christian motivation. Please see the disclaimer under the section "Violence" in this dossier.

- 11 July 2019: The Syrian Orthodox church of the Virgin Mary in Qamishli, north-eastern Syria, was targeted in a car bomb attack. State media reported that 11 civilians were injured, the church gate was dented and nearby shops severely damaged ([Al Monitor](#)).
- 8 July 2019: Armenian Christian lady Suzan Der Kirkour (60) living in the Syrian Governorate of Idlib went missing. When her body was found one day later, the autopsy revealed that she had been tortured and repeatedly raped for approximately nine hours. Finally she was stoned to death. (Source: [International Christian Concern](#))
- 12 May 2019: The Christian town of al-Suqaylabiyah in north-western Syria came under heavy assault. As a result of heaving shelling, five young children died who were playing near a monastery during a Sunday school gathering, including their teacher. Four others were injured. One week later, a sixth child died of his injuries. Al-Suqaylabiyah is located in government-held territory, close to the border with Idlib Province area which is controlled by HTS. According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, 'those behind the attack are thought to be Islamic militants who were specifically targeting the faith community'. (Source: [Syrian Observatory for Human Rights](#))

- November 2018: According to Syrians for Truth and Justice: "HTS seized 400 houses and 50 shops, owned by Christians, in the province of Idlib" in November 2018. Reportedly, the violent Islamist group considers such property to be the spoils of war. If this happened in just one month, the number during the whole WWL reporting period is likely to be higher. As a result of loss of property and violations of their rights, most of the Christians in Idlib have moved to government-held areas or abroad. (Source: [Syrians for Truth and Justice](#))

External Links - WWL 2020: Persecution summary

- Specific examples of persecution in the reporting period: Al Monitor - <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2019/07/syria-kurdish-bombings-war-church-motorcycle-assad-regime.html#ixzz64JUdYiqN>
- Specific examples of persecution in the reporting period: International Christian Concern - <https://www.persecution.org/2019/07/17/christian-woman-stoned-death-syria/>
- Specific examples of persecution in the reporting period: Syrian Observatory for Human Rights) - <http://www.syriahr.com/en/?p=128704>
- Specific examples of persecution in the reporting period: Syrians for Truth and Justice - <https://stj-sy.org/en/syria-at-least-750-christian-houses-illegally-seized-in-jisr-al-shughur-idlib/>

WWL 2020: Keys to understanding / Syria

Link for general background information

BBC country profile: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-14703856>.

Recent history

After the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, Syria was granted independence in 1946, but lacked political stability and faced several military coups. In 1958, Syria united with Egypt to form the United Arab Republic. The two countries separated three and a half years later and the Syrian Arab Republic was re-established. Syria lost the Golan Heights region to Israel during the 1967 Arab-Israeli six day war. Political stability came when Hafiz al-Assad of the socialist Baath party took power in 1970 and ruled as president until his death in 2000. His son, Bashar al-Assad, was then appointed president by popular referendum, and again for a second term in 2007.

In March 2011 anti-government protests started that developed into a civil war. The background is complex and includes class conflict, rural/urban divisions and repressed political liberty. This explains why the conflict spread so quickly and evolved into a sectarian identity conflict. The government first responded with concessions, but soon resorted to military force which was met with armed opposition. The battle attracted foreign jihadist fighters and in June 2014 the radical Islamic State group (IS) established its caliphate in large parts of Syria, with Raqqa as its capital. In 2016 and 2017 IS lost most of its territory due to military intervention by the West and Russia. In March 2018, around [25,000 Free Syrian Army fighters](#), many being battle-hardened Islamists, were fighting alongside Turkish regular troops and special forces and took control of areas around the northwestern (and mostly Kurdish) city of Afrin forcing out Kurdish rebels ruling the area. International religious liberty analyst and advocate Elizabeth Kendal reports in the [Religious Liberty and Prayer Bulletin](#) of March 2018: "Hundreds of civilians have been killed and wounded; many thousands are now displaced from what had long been one of Syria's great safe havens. Sources on the ground report that 'Jihadists allied with Turkey are hunting down [Christian and other] religious minorities to kill them in Syria's north-west [and] along its border'".

The majority of the country is now under government-control with the exception of Idlib Province, Western Aleppo Province, the northern region of Hama Province and the north east. These remaining areas are currently controlled by Turkish forces, [the Global Coalition](#), Islamist groups or Kurdish authorities. In January 2019, jihadists took control of the strategic north western town of Idlib. Fighting intensified throughout 2019, killing hundreds of civilians and displacing hundreds of thousands. Meanwhile, the Islamic State group (IS) continued attacking civilian targets in the northeast, even after its last bastion in the east was taken by Kurdish-led forces in March 2019.

Most recent developments are a Turkish-led incursion into north Syria in October 2019. This move was strongly condemned by the Assyrian Democratic Organization who recorded that 160 Christian families were displaced by the fighting. Subsequent developments are the retaking of the semi-autonomous Kurdish Region by the Syrian army and the agreement of Tuesday 22 October 2019 between Turkey and Russia regarding a 'safety zone' in the North of Syria.

Political and legal landscape

Bashar al-Assad - in power since taking over from his father in 2000 - is fighting for control of his country. He inherited a tightly controlled and repressive political structure from long-time dictator Hafez al-Assad, with an inner circle dominated by members of the Assad family's minority Alawite Shia community. The EIU classifies the Syrian government as 'authoritarian'.

The Syrian opposition has increasingly “Islamized” and the civil war has quickly taken the form of a “jihad” against the Syrian government. The establishment of the IS caliphate in June 2014 further accelerated this development, although since 2016 IS lost large parts of its territory as a result of international intervention. In March 2019 their last remaining territory in eastern Syria fell.

The position of the Syrian government appears secure and has clearly benefitted from the continued support from Russia and Iran. Fighting continues particularly in areas close to the frontline where government-held territory borders on areas controlled by rebel militias. Here Christians are caught in the crossfire between government troops and rebel forces.

FSI political indicators show that the situation in Syria however remains highly volatile with Human Rights, External interventions and State legitimacy being ranked to be in the worst possible shape.

The US State Department's [2018 Report on International Religious Freedom](#) (IRF) describes the Syrian legal framework as follows: "The constitution declares the state shall respect all religions and shall ensure the freedom to perform religious rituals as long as these do not disturb the public order. There is no official state religion, although the constitution states the religion of the president of the republic is Islam. The constitution states Islamic jurisprudence shall be a major source of legislation. The constitution states '[issues] of personal status of the religious communities shall be protected and respected,' and 'the citizens are equal in rights and duties, without discrimination among them on grounds of gender, origin, language, religion, or creed.' Citizens have the right to sue the government if they believe it has violated their rights."

Conversion to Islam is permitted, but leaving Islam is prohibited. Proselytism is restricted by law. Regarding areas in the country where opposition or militant Islamic groups are in control, the IRF 2018 report states that "irregular courts and local 'authorities' apply a variety of unofficial legal codes with diverse provisions relating to religious freedom."

Christians in Syria have suffered disproportionately from ongoing war and displacement leaving them extremely vulnerable and without protective factors. Issues that Syrian Christians highlight in particular is the ongoing lack of safety, lack of basic necessities and work to sustain livelihoods.

Religious landscape

Syria is a Muslim majority country. According to the [CIA World Factbook](#), 74% of all Muslims are Sunni and 13% are Alawi, Ismaili and Shia.

One of the main features of Syria's Christian population is its complicated ethnic and religious identity. The geographical concentration of Christians in strategic areas has also been an important factor in their vulnerability: Such areas as Aleppo and Damascus (with surrounding areas) and the southern areas of the Homs governorate near the Lebanese border have been vital to both the government and the opposition's war efforts.

MEC reports: Syria's Christian communities face multiple challenges within the context of the current conflict. In the majority of the country that is under government control, Christians enjoy reasonably good standing in society, though some restrictions apply to recognized Christian communities, especially to activities that could be construed as proselytism. The provision of enhanced powers to the Ministry of Religious Endowments in October 2018, ostensibly to prevent extremism and promote moderation, prompted some Christians leaders to express concern that the greater reach of Islamic authorities may threaten other faith groups.

Of those who have fled from government-controlled areas, including Christians, many have done so to avoid military conscription. A common assumption that Christians are pro-government (often correct, not least because of fear of alternatives) contributes to the tolerance in government areas but adds to Christians' vulnerability in areas controlled by opposition groups. Few Christians remain in opposition-held areas, where violence has included attacks against Christians, Christian-owned property and church buildings. Mass displacement of Christians has not been reversed following the military defeat of IS in its strongholds of Raqqa and Deir ez-Zour in late 2017, and five Christian leaders abducted by radical Islamic groups in 2013 remain unaccounted for.

Within predominantly Kurdish areas, indigenous Christian communities have reasonable living conditions, although some church leaders have expressed concern that the aggressive assertion of Kurdish identity has at times marginalized or been coercive towards Christian communities.

In all areas there is strong family and societal pressure against those who choose to leave Islam, and in extreme cases these responses are violent. Those considered apostates can face sanctions in the Sharia personal status courts such as forced divorce and removal of child custody. Those who choose to leave Islam are especially vulnerable in opposition-controlled areas.

Due to war and displacement, it is not possible to present a precise representation of Syria's current religious demography. The table below gives an overview using WCD estimates:

Religious Context: Syria	Numbers	%
Christians	744,000	4.0
Muslim	17,289,000	93.5
Hindu	2,400	0.0
Buddhist	0	0.0
Ethnoreligionist	0	0.0
Jewish	100	0.0
Bahai	510	0.0
Atheist	22,100	0.1
Agnostic	441,000	2.4
Other	100	0.0

Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds., World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2019). OTHER includes Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian.

Economic landscape

After 8 years of conflict and humanitarian crisis the World Bank classifies Syria as a low income economy with the UN estimating that 1/3 of the population remaining food insecure. [Relief web](#) summarizes the current state of the crisis as follows: "An estimated 11.7 million people are in need of various forms of humanitarian assistance An estimated 6.2 million people remained internally displaced ... The UN estimates that 25 per cent of internally displaced persons (IDPs) are women of reproductive age, and 4 per cent are pregnant women that require sustained maternal health services, including emergency obstetric care." Many relief and humanitarian programs remain underfunded.

There is widespread poverty due to unemployment, low salaries and the devaluation of the Syrian pound. Christians suffer from the high rate of unemployment and are highly dependent on relief aid. The prices for food, basic needs and medical supplies are high due to increased distribution risks. Many of the Christians left in the country are poor and risk malnutrition. Christians are regarded by many as being wealthy and supporters of Assad's government; this adds to their vulnerability, since as non-Muslims they are already part of a fragile minority.

FSI indicators show that human flight and 'brain drain' continue, as does external intervention.

The [EIU](#) analysis for the Syrian economy states: "Reconstruction is beginning in regime-controlled areas, as well as in some areas of partial Turkish control in Aleppo, edging up economic prospects."

Social and cultural landscape

Syrian society is ethnically diverse, but used to be characterized by the presence of a significant middle class. This middle class is largely diminished, together with its cultural values and lifestyle. Daily life is now dominated more by survival and the ongoing war has led to considerable emotional strain on society, leading to increased levels of fear, sleeplessness, depression, aggression in families and drug abuse. Local Christians have reported the breakdown of normal relationships within families and the need for trauma prevention and social support. FSI social indicators show a slight improvement in demographic pressures, but the needs of IDPs remain at the highest possible levels. FSI cohesion indicators show that pressures on society from factionalized elites continues to increase.

About [2 million](#) school-aged children are failing to get school education as a result of the war, which leads to high risks of illiteracy. However, in comparison to previous years, more children have been going to school in 2019 as there are now fewer areas affected by fighting. Christian children are particularly vulnerable as many Christian schools have been closed or damaged and children have had to attend (Islamic) government schools.

Young people, especially males, are leaving the country. In consequence, the emerging age gap is contributing to the economic crisis. The young generation are leaving not only in hope of finding better future prospects but also to avoid mandatory military service.

The Freedom of Thought Report highlights especially the [vulnerability of women](#): Violence against women such as rape is used as a weapon of war. In the refugee camps, domestic violence and sexual exploitation is reportedly on the increase. Local Christians report that the ratio of men/woman in Syria is 1:7 and in the church context it may be even more. In addition to the poverty and lack of (young) males available for work, Christian females are under pressure to find work and are vulnerable to exploitation and abuse. In more conservative Sunni areas, women are not usually given the opportunity to fill this gap in the workforce.

In addition, water scarcity and poor sanitation threaten the lives of millions of Syrian children and adults. According to the [2019 Syria Humanitarian Needs Overview](#) (HNO), some 11.7 million people are still in need of humanitarian assistance, of whom 5 million people are in acute need.

According to the 2019 CIA World Factbook: "As of December 2018, approximately 6.2 million Syrians were internally displaced. Approximately 13 million people were in need of humanitarian assistance across the country, and an additional 5.7 million Syrians were registered as refugees in Turkey, Jordan, Iraq, Egypt, and North Africa. The conflict in Syria remains one of the largest humanitarian crises worldwide."

Technological landscape

The telecommunications sector in Syria has paid a heavy price during the recent destructive years. Telecommunications research site [Budde.com](#) sums the situation up as follows: "The years of civil unrest in Syria have taken their toll on Syria's telecommunications infrastructure and while the capital Damascus has survived reasonably well, it is the outskirts, rural and remote areas which have felt the brunt of the destruction. ... Telecommunications in Syria have become decentralized and some of the remote areas rely on expensive satellite communications while the urban areas utilise the highly regulated network supplied by the government-owned Syrian Telecommunications Establishment (STE). Initiatives have been launched to liberalise the market in the past but without much success. Syria has a reasonably high mobile penetration and many Syrians own cheap or second-hand smart phones."

[Freedom on the Net](#) 2018 makes the following assessment of the level of Internet restrictions in Syria: "Despite heavy restrictions on internet freedom, the cost and availability of internet access improved over the past year. The unexplained unblocking of several websites was offset by heightened self-censorship amid growing threats and violent reprisals for online activities. ... No formal rationale was provided for the unblocking decision, though analysts think that as the government has gained ground in the civil war, it may be trying to demonstrate a reformist attitude toward freedom of expression. In March 2018, the government passed Law Number 9, which established specialized courts for criminal cases related to information and communication technologies. Judges on these courts will be specially trained to handle technological issues, although the results of this training on human rights conditions are yet to be seen. The lack of judicial independence in Syria has led to concerns that the new law could be used to suppress freedom of expression and criminalize critics of the regime even further. Despite relative improvements to access, Syria remains one of the most dangerous places to use the internet in the world."

Security situation

Fear among Christians has been at a high level over the last years, particularly caused by the threats, intimidation and kidnappings carried out by radical Islamic groups such as the al-Qaeda-affiliated Jabhat al-Nusra (now called Hayat Tahrir al Sham, HTS), the Ansar Brigade and the al-Farouq Battalions. The flood of foreign jihadist fighters and the imposition of the IS caliphate in 2014 clearly added a religious component to the persecution of Christians in the civil war. Already in February 2014 Christians in the city of Raqqa were forced to sign a 'dhimmi contract' violating their (religious) freedom. In February 2015 [BBC News](#) reported: "In areas seized by the jihadist group Islamic State (IS), Christians have been ordered to convert to Islam, pay jizya (a religious levy), or face death. In the Syrian province of Hassakeh in February 2015, [hundreds of Christians are feared to have been kidnapped by the militants](#). Senior Christian clerics have also been kidnapped by unknown gunmen. Suspicion for the abductions has fallen on the Nusra Front, al-Qaeda's Syrian affiliate."

Although IS has been militarily defeated, its influence has not disappeared. Fighting also continues in Idlib Province against other jihadist factions backed by Turkey. Christians are caught in the crossfire between government troops and rebel forces especially at the frontlines. [Think Tank IHS market](#) makes the following assessment of the security situation in its July 2019 update: "The Islamic State's 'caliphate' has been eliminated, but the group retains sufficient intelligence penetration and capability to conduct sophisticated IED attacks in much of Syria, particularly along the Euphrates and Khabur rivers, and in the Homs and Suwayda deserts. Separately, Al-Qaeda affiliate Hay'a Tahrir al-Sham occasionally targets government, civilian, and strategic assets in government-held areas with VBIEDs. The security situation at Damascus International Airport has improved significantly over the past 12 months, although there remains an elevated risk of collateral damage to aircraft on the ground from Israeli airstrikes against the Iranian presence. There is a high risk of accidental shutdown for aircraft operating over southern/central Syria from Syrian surface-to-air missiles in the event of such airstrikes."

Trends analysis

The [Economist Intelligence Unit \(EIU\)](#) summarizes Syria's current situation and expectations for the next few years as follows: "The position of the president, Bashar al-Assad, is secure, partly owing to Russian and Iranian support. Intermittent fighting will continue, but on a more localised scale. Following Turkey's Operation Peace Spring, the regime has returned to north-eastern Syria and Russia has agreed to Turkey's proposed "safe zone" along the Turkish-Syrian border. The reconstruction is beginning in regime-controlled areas, as well as in some areas of partial Turkish control, edging up economic prospects."

As the regime position is becoming more stable, security is improving in government-controlled areas. This also has a downside: Control on all civilians has reportedly increased, including on Christians - especially those from Muslim and non-traditional Christian backgrounds. Also, in the Kurdish areas of northern Syria where previously Christians (including converts from Islam) enjoyed comparative freedom, pressure on Christians seems to have increased. This pressure is understood to result from a hardening Islamic atmosphere among Kurdish authorities. With most Islamist groups defeated or pushed into Syria's north-west, the Syrian government has vowed to liberate the strategic north-western town of Idlib. Christians and other residents of Idlib are already [heavily affected](#) by fighting there.

External Links - WWL 2020: Keys to understanding

- Link for general background information: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-14703856>. - <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-14703856>
- Recent history: 25,000 Free Syrian Army fighters - <http://rlprayerbulletin.blogspot.com/2018/03/turkey-in-syria-afrin-falls-christians.html>
- Recent history: Religious Liberty and Prayer Bulleting - <http://rlprayerbulletin.blogspot.com/2018/03/turkey-in-syria-afrin-falls-christians.html>
- Recent history: the Global Coalition - <https://theglobalcoalition.org/en/partners/>
- Political and legal landscape: 2018 Report on International Religious Freedom - <https://www.state.gov/reports/2018-report-on-international-religious-freedom/syria/>
- Religious landscape: CIA World Factbook - <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/sy.html>

- Economic landscape: Relief web - <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/2019-humanitarian-needs-overview-syrian-arab-republic-enar>
- Economic landscape: EIU - <http://country.eiu.com/syria>
- Social and cultural landscape: 2 million - <http://www.spokesman.com/stories/2018/sep/07/back-to-school-but-not-for-all-of-syrias-children/>
- Social and cultural landscape: vulnerability of women - <https://fot.humanists.international/countries/asia-western-asia/iraq/>
- Social and cultural landscape: 2019 Syria Humanitarian Needs Overview - <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/unhcr-syria-factsheet-june-2019>
- Technological landscape: Budde.com - <https://www.budde.com.au/Research/Syria-Telecoms-Mobile-and-Broadband-Statistics-and-Analyses?r=51>
- Technological landscape: Freedom on the Net - <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/syria>
- Security situation: BBC News - <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-22270455>
- Security situation: hundreds of Christians are feared to have been kidnapped by the militants - <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-31622883>
- Security situation: Think Tank IHS market - <https://www.garda.com/crisis24/country-reports/syria>
- Trends analysis: Economist Intelligence Unit - <http://country.eiu.com/syria>
- Trends analysis: heavily affected - <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jan/13/syria-idlib-refugees-assad-migration-rebels>

WWL 2020: Church information / Syria

Christian origins

The Church has been present in Syria since the time of the New Testament, where the conversion of Saul/Paul is mentioned on the road to Damascus (see Acts 9). The Apostle Paul was initially part of the church in Antioch, but over the next centuries Christianity spread from there to all parts of Syria. The New Testament confirms that the Syrian cities of Damascus and Antioch had Christian communities. Christian faith spread fast and at the Council of Nicea in 325 AD 22 Syrian bishops were present. There was also persecution: Bishop Ignatius from Antioch (who died in 115 AD in Rome) is just one example of many martyrs.

The language of Christianity in Syria was Syriac (Aramaic). Many Syrian Christians followed the Jacobite form of Christianity that was condemned as heretical at the Council of Chalcedon (451), but the 'Greek' Church also remained popular in Syria.

It was in the 7th century, when Christianity was still the majority religion in Syria, that Caliph Omar dismissed Christian officials and his successor obliged all Christians to wear distinctive dress. One century later, Abbasid Caliph al-Mahdi forced Arab Christians of the Tannukh tribe to convert to Islam. In Homs, Christians revolted in 855 and their leaders were crucified at the city gates. By the 9th century, Islam was gaining the upper hand, many churches had become mosques and, by about 900 AD, approximately half the Syrian population was Muslim.

In the 12-13th centuries, Syria was the target of several [crusades](#). In 1124 the Aleppo cathedral was made into a mosque. By 1350 Christianity had become a minority religion: Out of a population of one million, only 100,000 were Christians. The fall of Constantinople and the Ottoman occupation of Syria were an obstacle to reuniting the Church in the 15th century. However, in the next century, the Orthodox, Jacobite and Armenian Christians were recognized by the Ottoman sultan as independent communities with their own courts and laws.

In 1516, the region became part of the Ottoman Empire and remained so until World War I (1914-1918), when Arab and British troops eventually defeated the Turkish rulers in the region. This ended a century of major persecution incidents targeting Christians. In 1860, 25000 Christians were killed in Damascus in three days of pogroms. At that time, the first American protestant missionaries were working in Syria, with a focus on setting up schools, medical ministries and literature distribution. About half a century later, beginning in 1915, vast numbers of Armenians fled (or were deported) to Syria in the course of the widespread massacres of approximately 1.5 million Armenian and half a million Assyrian Christians in Turkey.

In 1920, Syria became a French mandate. At that time it received its present name and borders (except for the Golan Heights). It became fully independent in 1946. Politically, the country has been marked by instability. One problem for Syria is that it is a patchwork of religious groups. Hafiz al-Assad ruled Syria from 1970-2000 with an iron fist, forcing it to become secular and modernizing the economy. In 2011 mass uprisings, demanding human rights and equality, led to a full-blown civil war with an estimated death-toll of 370,000- 570,000. An estimated 5 million Syrians currently live in exile.

Throughout the centuries, the Christian church in Syria has gone through – and still is going through – considerable levels of persecution. Due to years of persecution, forced conversion and emigration, Christians now form less than 5% of the population.

Church spectrum today

Church networks: Syria	Christians	%
Orthodox	484,000	65.1
Catholic	224,000	30.1
Protestant	29,100	3.9
Independent	3,700	0.5
Unaffiliated	3,600	0.5
Doubly-affiliated Christians	0	0.0
Total	744,400	100.1
<i>(Any deviation from the total number of Christians stated above is due to the rounding of decimals)</i>		
Evangelical movement	10,200	1.4
Renewalist movement	19,900	2.7

Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds., *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2019).

Orthodox: Eastern (Chalcedonian), Oriental (Pre-Chalcedonian, Non-Chalcedonian, Monophysite), Nestorian (Assyrian), and non-historical Orthodox. Roman Catholics: All Christians in communion with the Church of Rome. Protestants: Christians in churches originating in or in communion with the Western world's 16th-century Protestant Reformation. Includes Anglicans, Lutherans and Baptists (any of whom may be Charismatic) and denominational Pentecostals, but not Independent traditions such as Independent Baptists nor independent Charismatics. Independents: Believers who do not identify with the major Christian traditions (Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Protestant). Unaffiliated Christians: Persons professing publicly to be Christians but who are not affiliated to churches. Doubly-affiliated Christians: Persons affiliated to or claimed by 2 denominations at once. Evangelical movement: Churches, denominations, and individuals who identify themselves as evangelicals by membership in denominations linked to evangelical alliances (e.g., World Evangelical Alliance) or by self-identification in polls. Renewalist movement: Church members involved in Pentecostal/Charismatic renewal.

External Links - WWL 2020: Church information

- Christian origins: crusades - <https://fanack.com/syria/history-past-to-present/crusades-1095-1291/>

WWL 2020: Persecution Dynamics / Syria

Reporting period

1 November 2018 – 31 October 2019

Position on World Watch List (WWL)

With a score of 82 points, Syria ranked 11 in WWL 2020, the same score and position as in WWL 2019.

The scores for pressure in the different *spheres of life* and for Violence did not change much.

Persecution engines

Persecution engines: Syria	Abbreviation	Level of influence
Islamic oppression	IO	Very strong
Religious nationalism	RN	Weak
Clan and ethnic antagonism	CEA	Strong
Christian denominational protectionism	CDP	Medium
Communist and post - Communist oppression	CPCO	Not at all
Secular intolerance	SI	Not at all
Dictatorial paranoia	DPA	Strong
Organized corruption and crime	OCC	Medium

The scale for the level of influence of Persecution engines in society is: Not at all / Very weak / Weak / Medium / Strong / Very strong. For more information see WWL Methodology.

Islamic oppression (Very Strong):

Islamic oppression is the major Persecution engine in Syria and accounts for most of the atrocities and acts of persecution committed against Christians. Militants belonging to radical Islamic groups such as al-Qaeda affiliate Hayat Tahrir al Sham (HTS) and Jaish al-Islam, are currently the main drivers of persecution in Syria. They are operating openly in the north-west of Syria and across the northern part of the country to Hasakah.

Christians used to have a relatively large amount of religious freedom in pre-civil war Syria. This changed with the arrival of militant Islamic groups. IS set up its caliphate covering large parts of Syria and Iraq at the end of June 2014 and a strict version of Sharia law was implemented. Most Christians fled IS-controlled areas, but since the beginning of 2016, IS began to lose more and more of its territory. The IS-caliphate was finally eliminated in March 2019. However, the threat of revenge actions by IS still exists as the group continues to conduct sophisticated ([IED](#)) attacks in large parts of Syria.

Islamic militants currently control less than 25% of Syria's territory. *Islamic oppression* is also present in government-controlled areas, affecting mostly converts from Islam to Christianity where pressure is exerted by the converts' family and community. Slight pressure is also exerted on indigenous Christians; for instance, during Ramadan in 2019, posters appeared in Christian neighborhoods in Aleppo urging Christian women to veil themselves.

Clan and ethnic antagonism (Strong):

Tribalism is characterized by loyalty to one's own tribe or family and the age-old norms and values they embody. As in many countries of the Middle East, tribalism in Syria is very much mixed with Islam and especially affects Christians with a Muslim background. The strength and existence of this engine varies per region and size of cities. Tribalism is especially strong in the Kurdish areas in the north and in the desert areas in central Syria.

In the Kurdish areas, ethnicity is an important factor in the struggle between the Turks and the Kurds. The Turkish forces which took over the north-western and mostly Kurdish areas around Afrin in March 2018, [reportedly](#) used "hardline jihadist proxies including Islamic State and al-Qaeda militants, to eliminate the presence of Kurds and other ethnic and religious minorities along its border". These religious minorities include Christians, most of whom are Armenian and Assyrian.

Dictatorial paranoia (Strong):

In present-day Syria, this Persecution engine is predominantly driven not by the government, but by armed groups that control parts of Syria and are willing to use any means to stay in power. In pre-civil war Syria, *Dictatorial paranoia* was mostly evident in the behavior of government officials who monitored churches, for instance, checking sermons for political content. Also, the authorities would discourage conversion from Islam to Christianity or to any other religion, as conversions were seen as possibly harming stability in society and causing community conflict. The latter point is still relevant: The main objective for the government is to secure social stability rather than protect religious minorities (including Christians). The government mostly acts against Christians (and any other group) if they are considered a threat to the status quo either by the authorities or any other local entity; evangelization or church-work focussing on contact with Muslims could be regarded as such a threat. Due to the war, there was a reduction in citizen-monitoring by the authorities. However, now that the government has regained dominance, surveillance is reportedly returning too.

Organized corruption and crime (Medium):

In Syria, *Organized corruption and crime* takes place in the civil war situation of impunity and anarchy. Corruption is widespread and also affects access to food and health care. It is a means for self-enrichment; an example is kidnap for ransom, which Syrians of various religious backgrounds have experienced. Behind the kidnapping of Christians there are financial, political and ideological motives. Christians have a reputation for being wealthy and for supporting the regime. Being part of a vulnerable non-Muslim minority also plays a role in their abduction, as Christians do not have political power or connections with high authorities and are therefore a 'soft target'.

Christian denominational protectionism (Medium): As a result of the Syrian crisis, there were many bridges built between historical church communities and non-traditional groups. These bridges were mostly built through personal interaction between priests and pastors. However, senior leadership in several historical churches resist building any bridges with non-traditional churches. They have accused some non-traditional Christians of betraying their nation by linking up with Western political agendas, thus making them suspect in the eyes of the authorities. In addition, there were accounts of many senior historical church leaders officially and unofficially not recognizing Christians from a Muslim background.

Drivers of persecution

Drivers of Persecution: Syria	IO	RN	CEA	CDP	CPC O	S I	DPA	OCC
	VERY STRONG	WEAK	STRONG	MEDIUM	-	-	STRONG	MEDIUM
Government officials	Medium	Very weak	Weak	-	-	-	Medium	Weak
Ethnic group leaders	Strong	Strong	Strong	-	-	-	Weak	-
Non-Christian religious leaders	Strong	Strong	Strong	-	-	-	Weak	-
Religious leaders of other churches	-	-	Weak	Medium	-	-	-	-
Violent religious groups	Very strong	-	-	-	-	-	Very strong	Strong
Ideological pressure groups	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs	Strong	Medium	Medium	Very weak	-	-	-	-
One's own (extended) family	Very strong	Very strong	Strong	Weak	-	-	-	-
Political parties	Weak	-	-	-	-	-	Weak	-
Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups	Medium	-	-	-	-	-	Strong	-
Organized crime cartels or networks	Weak	Medium	-	-	-	-	-	Medium

Multilateral organizations (e.g. UN, OIC etc.) and embassies	Weak	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
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The scale for the level of influence of Drivers of persecution in society is: Not at all / Very weak / Weak / Medium / Strong / Very strong. Please note that "-" denotes "not at all". For more information see WWL Methodology.

Drivers of Islamic oppression:

- Violent religious groups (Very strong) and Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups (Medium):** Some opposition groups are more Islamist than others. In the early days of the Free Syrian Army (FSA), for example, some FSA units had reasonably clear political revolutionary objectives without a dominating religious agenda. However, as the conflict became more protracted, there was clear evidence of Islamic radicalization taking place. Among the various revolutionary and paramilitary groups, those with the more radical Islamist agendas pose the greatest threat to Christians and other minority groups (including Muslims considered to be heretical). These mostly Salafist groups have all contributed to the violent persecution of Christians and other minorities, most prominently (but not exclusively) IS and al-Qaeda affiliate HTS. They continue to pose an extreme threat to Christian life in northern Syria, in particular.
- Non-Christian religious leaders (Strong):** In the increasingly small areas controlled by Islamist opposition factions, Islamic leaders have typically pursued a policy of marginalizing Christians and other minorities or of forcing them to flee to other areas. It is, however, often difficult to distinguish between 'religious leader' and leaders of 'violent religious groups'. Footage on social media showed Turkish sheikhs praying for Turkish soldiers to conquer the Kurdish area and bring it back to Islam, whatever the cost. Also in government-controlled areas, hate-speech against Christians by Islamic leaders occurs; however, this is not allowed and in some cases has led to the withdrawal of licenses to preach in mosques. Muslim religious leaders are also known to put pressure on converts directly or indirectly through their families or security agencies.
- Extended family, Ethnic leaders and Normal citizens (Strong):** As in other Middle Eastern countries, converting from Islam to Christianity comes with massive pressure from family, tribe and society as whole. Family hostility is the main source of pressure faced by Christians from a Muslim background. A significant aspect of this pressure is the fear of provoking violent reactions from immediate or extended family. Ethnic leaders that are drivers of *Islamic oppression* are mostly tribal leaders.

Drivers of Clan and ethnic antagonism:

- Extended family, Ethnic leaders and Non-Christian religious leaders (Strong):** Family, tribe, ethnic group and non-Christian religious leaders have put pressure on converts from Islam to Christianity. As drivers of *Clan and ethnic antagonism* they are especially strong in the Kurdish areas in the north and in the desert areas in central Syria. Also, Assyrian communities report being marginalized at the hands of overly-assertive Kurdish local administrators.

- **Normal citizens (Medium):** Changing your religion to Christianity is considered treason to the values of the community and leads to great opposition, when discovered. Ethnicity and religion are intertwined and the same dynamics are active here as listed under *Islamic oppression*.

Drivers of Dictatorial paranoia:

- **Violent religious groups (Very strong) and Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups (Strong):** Dictatorial paranoia as a persecution engine in present day Syria is predominantly driven by armed groups that control parts of Syria and are willing to use any means to stay in power. Islamic militant groups took over a lot of Christian-owned properties. Christian elderly people who remained in their homes are in constant fear of being killed or kidnapped by militants in order to take over their houses as well. In north-eastern Syria, Kurdish authorities have also tried to take over many houses belonging to Christians who left the country. Also in government-held areas, there have been efforts to take over church-owned property, such as the monastery in Aleppo.
- **Government officials (Medium):** President Assad emphasizes his regime's commitment to pluralism and inter-faith tolerance and has a positive attitude especially towards traditional Christian communities. In common with many conflict situations, those in authority in Syria use control tactics to maintain power. Sunni officials in local authorities are particularly watchful of all religious groups and are known to restrict the activities of evangelical Christians and converts in order to prevent societal instability. This can include interrogation and monitoring and is sometimes instigated by a converts' family or even by leaders of Historical church communities. Finally, there are claims that Christian soldiers within the Syrian Army are given more dangerous duties and that Christian civil servants have received inferior treatment compared to others.

Drivers of Organized corruption and crime:

- **Violent religious groups (Strong), Organized crime cartels or networks (Medium):** Christians have been targeted for kidnappings by criminal networks, including IS, although this has now become sporadic. Whilst there may be a religious aspect behind kidnapping, the usual driving factor for the gangs and criminals involved is money - and Christians are perceived as being wealthy. The country is rife with corruption and bribery is part of daily life whenever a Syrian needs to deal with the authorities. For instance, if you want to pass a military checkpoint you might have to pay bribes or face serious intimidation. Converts from a Druze background are also faced with the threat of abduction from Druze militant groups. Also here, there is a financial and a religious motive; these Christians are additionally vulnerable since they lack protection from militias or local authorities.

Geographical hotspots of persecution

Christians are particularly under pressure in the last bastions of Islamic militant control in Idlib Province in the northwest and in Hasakah Province in the northeast, where IS has continued to attack civilian and church targets. Pressure on converts exists in the entire country, but their situation is particularly dangerous in the northwest and northeast.

Christian communities and how they are affected

Three of the four WWL categories of Christianity exist in Syria and are affected by persecution related to the civil war.

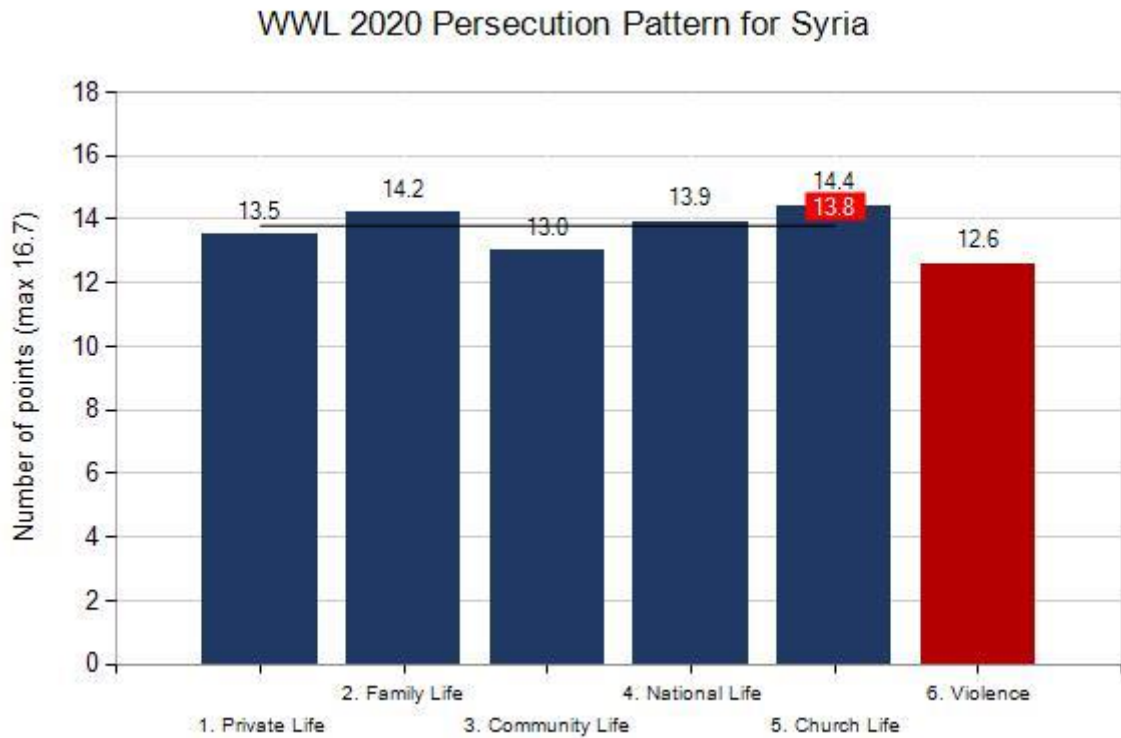
Communities of expatriate Christians: Expatriate Christians are not forced into isolation. This category is therefore not scored in WWL analysis.

Historical Christian communities: These are mostly Greek Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches. As the largest type of Christianity in the country, Christians from historical Christian communities are specifically targeted. They are spread over the entire country and are also present in conflict zones. Of this group, it is the leaders that are mostly affected, due to their public visibility. Clergy from historical churches are recognizable by their clothing which sometimes makes them a target. Historical Christian communities tend to be more recognizable in society than other types of Christianity, for instance by clearly recognizable churches and their members are socio-economically more connected to the state apparatus. The political reputation of denominations, churches and local church leaders plays an important role in the level of persecution or oppression they face from groups that are fighting President Assad. It is thus decisive how churches and Christians aligned themselves politically in the past – i.e. whether they were supportive of Assad, tried to stay neutral, distanced themselves from him or even opposed him.

Converts to Christianity: Christians from a Muslim or Druze background are especially put under pressure by their family, as it brings great dishonor to them if a family member leaves their religion. This is particularly true in majority Sunni areas, where converts risk being banned from their family homes or worse. In a reaction to the increased radicalization of Islam, opposition from family and society towards converts from a Muslim background has increased particularly within rebel-controlled areas. Pressure from the family is somewhat less intense in Kurdish areas, as the Kurdish Sunnis are generally less radical. Since the state authorities currently have other priorities to deal with, the slight governmental pressure on converts that there had been in earlier years, has diminished.

Non-traditional Christian communities: Baptist, Evangelical and Pentecostal congregations are in a vulnerable position as they are known for their Western orientation, fragmentation, lack of strong leadership and lack of a foreign spokesperson (e.g. like a Pope or bishop) who can speak on their behalf. Most of the non-traditional Christian communities lack full, official recognition and legal status. There are non-traditional Christian communities in various parts of Syria, particularly in regime-held territory and in Kurdish areas. Those in areas held by Islamist opposition groups would be most vulnerable to violence. Within regime-held areas, there is some pressure from traditional churches too.

The Persecution pattern



The WWL 2020 Persecution pattern for Syria shows:

- The average pressure on Christians over all *Spheres of life* is at an extreme level and scored 13.8 points, just like in WWL 2019.
- Pressure in three *Spheres of life* is at an extreme level and was strongest in the *Church* (14.4), *Family* (14.2) and *National* (13.9). In the *Private* (13.5) and *Community* (13.0) *spheres of life* pressure was very high. This is typical for a situation in which *Islamic oppression* is the main persecution engine, combined with *Dictatorial paranoia*.
- Pressure from *Islamic oppression* is present mostly in the *Private, Family, Community* and *Church* spheres and is exerted by the social environment.
- The score for violence went down from 13.0 in WWL 2019 to 12.6 in WWL 2020 – mostly explained by a slightly lower number of Christian buildings being attacked (5 in WWL 2020 versus 7 in WWL 2019).

Pressure in the 5 spheres of life

In each of the five spheres of life discussed below, details are shown from four of the highest scoring block questions, with those items scoring highest listed first. In some cases, an additional paragraph per sphere is included to give further information deemed important. (To see how individual questions are scored on a scale 0 – 4 points, please see the “WWL Scoring example” in the WWL Methodology, available at: <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/world-watch-list-documentation/>, password: freedom).

Private sphere:

- ***It has been risky for Christians to discuss their faith with those other than immediate family members (extended family, others) (Block 1.8 / Score: 3.5 points):*** In areas controlled by Islamist opposition groups, it is dangerous for all Christian communities to discuss their faith with non-Christians. In the rest of the country this is particularly risky for converts, but also for non-convert Christians where it could be regarded as attempted evangelism, which is prohibited by law. The fragile peace between the various religions used to be maintained by avoiding anything that could be considered offensive or an attempt at evangelization.
- ***Conversion has been opposed, forbidden, or punishable (Block 1.1 / Score: 3.25 points):*** According to state law, Muslims are prohibited from converting to other religions as this is contrary to Islamic law. Therefore, the government and other religious groups strongly discourage conversion, although it is not criminalized. In areas held by Islamist opposition groups, such as Idlib Province, which is currently held by HTS militants, conversion from Islam is generally punishable by death. In areas controlled by Kurdish authorities, converts will face societal and public pressure. Most pressure on converts comes from their families.
- ***It has been dangerous to privately own or keep Christian materials (Block 1.3 / Score: 3.25 points):*** This is primarily a risk for converts if they are caught in possession of a Bible or other Christian material by a disapproving member of the family or community; it could lead to serious negative repercussions. For converts from Islam in areas held by Islamists, the discovery of these materials could be very dangerous as it risks revealing their conversion.
- ***It has been risky for Christians to reveal their faith in written forms of personal expression (including expressions in blogs and Facebook etc.) (Block 1.4 / Score: 3.25 points):*** In areas controlled by Islamist opposition groups, this can be risky for all categories of Christian communities. In the rest of the country, this is likely to prompt a hostile reaction primarily from family and community toward converts. In Kurdish areas, the reaction may be less severe since there is a higher level of tolerance, except for the zone currently occupied by Turkish forces. In government-controlled areas it is not risky for indigenous Christians (i.e. from a Christian background) to express their faith in written form as long as it does not cause controversy and it is a mere expression of faith (i.e. with no mention of politics, other faiths or evangelization).

All questions in the Private sphere in Syria have a score of 3 points or more. Pressure is especially strong in areas under the control of radical Islamic groups. All types of Christians are restricted in their personal worship of God, e.g. they cannot sing out loud. Under the influence of growing radicalism, converts throughout Syria experience a higher level of pressure in their private religious observance than non-converts. For other Christian communities, any act that can be understood as an attempt to spread their faith will not be well received.

Family sphere:

- **Christian spouses of non-Christians have been excluded from the right or opportunity to claim custody of children in divorce cases (Block 2.12 / Score: 4 points):** In cases in which a Muslim spouse divorces a Christian convert or an indigenous Christian (though this is more rare), custody rights are ordinarily given to the Muslim party. Some Christian mothers will convert to Islam just to keep her children with her.
- **Babies and children of Christians have automatically been registered under the state or majority religion (Block 2.1/ Score: 3.5 points):** The children of Syrian Christians from Muslim backgrounds would automatically be registered as Muslim, because their parents cannot officially change their religion.
- **Registering the birth, wedding, death, etc. of Christians has been hindered or made impossible (Block 2.2/ Score: 3.5 points):** There is no legal scope in Syria for a female Christian from a Muslim background to marry a male from an indigenous Christian family. Their Christian marriage would be illegal. From birth, the children of converts from Islam are considered Muslim. Upon death, it would be normal for the Muslim families to apply for Muslim burial rites for a convert.
- **Christian couples have been hindered in adopting children or serving as foster parents because of their faith? (Block 2.6 / Score: 3.5 points):** In areas held by Islamist opposition groups, it is expected that Christians cannot adopt at all. Elsewhere, only Catholics are allowed to adopt by law but they can only adopt Catholic children. Other church denominations cannot adopt. Also, Islamic law does not recognize or provide for adoptions of Muslim children.
- **Children of Christians have been harassed or discriminated against because of their parents' faith (Block 2.9/ Score: 3.5 points):** As a result of increased Islamic education in government-held areas, children of Christians are experiencing more pressure. Also, children who came from Islamist-controlled areas are emotionally charged against what they called infidels: Alawites, Christians and Kurds. Children of converts are considered Muslims and are very likely to be harassed and discriminated if the faith of their parents is known. Christians from all backgrounds are susceptible to discrimination in areas held by Islamist opposition groups and in the Kurdish controlled areas.

Converts face particular pressure in this sphere of life, if their new faith is discovered. However, pressure is slightly less intense in Kurdish areas. Also, converts are not able to change their religious identity in official documents except in the Kurdish regions where this was recently made possible. Furthermore, they cannot register (Christian) weddings, baptisms and burials. In areas controlled by Islamic militants, these issues are problematic for all categories of Christians. In the entire country, Christian spouses of Muslims are likely to be excluded from custody of children in cases of divorce.

Community sphere:

- ***Christians have been monitored by their local communities or by private groups (this includes reporting to police, being shadowed, telephone lines listened to, emails read/censored, etc.) (Block 3.2 / Score: 3.5 points):*** Monitoring takes place in the entire country, especially for Christians known to have a Muslim background and for Christians from non-traditional church groups. Also, all sermons are monitored and controlled. It is very probable that, in all areas, informal monitoring is routinely carried out for all Christian communities by the controlling authorities, often using community informers. The situation is especially serious in areas held by Islamist opposition groups.
- ***Christians have been pressured by their community to renounce their faith (Block 3.7 / Score: 3.5 points):*** This happens where the faith of a Christian from a Muslim background has become known, especially in more conservative Muslim families. This is in keeping with provisions in Islamic law relating to apostasy which hold that an apostate must be offered the opportunity to recant. For indigenous Christians, this pressure was applied within Islamist-controlled areas earlier in the civil war (e.g. the ultimatum from IS that Christians either convert, flee, pay jizya or are killed). Most of Syria's indigenous Christians were not affected by such demands as most Christians are not from areas previously or currently controlled by Islamists. For those who did face such threats, most fled from those areas prior to the WWL 2020 reporting period - but their reluctance to return to their homes in part reflects ongoing fear that Islamists would expect them to recant as a condition for being allowed to return and settle.
- ***Christians have faced disadvantages in their education at any level for faith-related reasons (e.g. restrictions of access to education) (Block 3.9 / Score: 3.5 points):*** This pressure applies, throughout Syria, to families of Christian converts - particularly in relation to access to Christian education. (Under the state system, religious instruction is provided according to confessional affiliation and converts are considered Muslim.) For indigenous Christians in some opposition-held areas, this pressure is also exerted, for example, through the enforced closure of Christian schools or (in Kurdish areas) through stipulations by local administrations that Kurdish curricula must be followed. In Idlib, Christians are heavily discriminated against in all phases of education. All universities controlled by HTS also implement Islamist teachings with the aim of indoctrinating the upcoming generation of Muslims. Christians are excluded by default.
- ***Christians have been discriminated against in public or private employment for faith-related reasons (Block 3.10 / Score: 3.5 points):*** This applies to converts whose faith becomes known, and potentially to indigenous Christians - especially in opposition-controlled areas. In government-held areas, sectarianism is officially banned and Christians can hold top ranks in the military and state apparatus. However, Alawites, members of Syria's governing sect, hold dominant positions in the military and other security services disproportionate to their numbers. Some Christians are also represented in Kurdish-held territories. A more general form of economic pressure is exerted in much of Syria through means of unemployment. In Aleppo, where Sunni Muslims control the market, they often do not employ Christians. Discrimination against Christians from a Druze background also occurs in majority Druze areas in southern Syria.

Community life is extremely limited for all categories of Christians in areas controlled by Islamic militants. If their faith is known, it is problematic for converts in the entire country. In areas controlled by Islamic militants all citizens (including Christians) have to abide by the Islamic dress code. Christians are forced to pay protection money and to keep commercial and dietary regulations, including a ban on alcohol.

National sphere:

- ***The Constitution (or comparable national or state law) limits freedom of religion as formulated in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Block 4.1 / Score: 3.75 points):*** The Syrian Constitution of 2012 specifies that the President must be a Muslim. It also establishes Islamic law as a major source of legislation - which provides a fundamental basis for discriminatory treatment of non-Muslims. The Constitution affirms the principle of non-discrimination, including on the basis of religion, and obliges the State to respect all religions and to ensure that freedom to perform religious rites is protected - all on the condition that they "do not disturb the public order". Conversion from Islam to any other religion is not recognized. In areas held by Islamist opposition groups, Sharia law applies, which severely restricts the freedom of all non-Sunni religious groups.
- ***Officials at any level have refused to recognize an individual's conversion as recorded in government administration systems, identity cards, etc. (Block 4.2 / Score: 3.5 points):*** With Sharia as a principle source of legislation, conversion from Islam to another religion out of Islam is illegal in Syria. No Christian from a Muslim background would apply to have their conversion officially recognized because they know that this cannot be granted and because to make such an application would expose them to potential danger. Currently, this situation is worst in Idlib.
- ***Christians have been forced by law or in practice to act against their conscience, e.g. regarding military service or in certain professions (Block 4.3/ Score: 3.5 points):*** In government-held areas, all males between 18 and 42 years of age have to serve in the armed forces or face imprisonment and forced conscription. This issue is among the factors making Christian refugees reluctant to return to Syria. This is an issue which is not specific to Christians, although some claim that Christians and other minorities are especially vulnerable within the army. Within opposition-held areas there may also be a general pressure to join defense forces or other militias. For instance, the World Council of Arameans expressed concern in January 2018 about the exploitation of Christians by the YPG Kurdish forces in Kurdish areas of northern Syria.
- ***Christians, churches or Christian organizations have been hindered in publicly displaying religious symbols (Block 4.12/ Score: 3.5 points):*** For indigenous churches, this applies primarily in opposition-held areas controlled by Islamist groups. Many churches have been desecrated, especially through the removal of crosses. Within these areas, many remaining Christians would be wary of publicly displaying Christians symbols in ways which could be provocative. For Christians from Muslim backgrounds throughout Syria, care would also be taken to avoid any provocative display of Christian symbols.

Due to the fractured state of the country, impunity and inequality has increased. In government-controlled areas, Christians are generally not discriminated against in national life. However, they may encounter glass ceilings in the public sector. Evangelism and conversion from Islam are prohibited and converts can be subjected to discrimination, if their faith is known. In areas controlled by radical Islamic elements, all non-Muslims (including Christians) are treated as second-class citizens.

Church sphere:

- ***Christian preaching, teaching and/or published materials have been monitored (Block 5.8 / Score: 3.75 points):*** From the onset of the current crisis, all gatherings (including church services) have been monitored and church leaders are expected to call upon members to support the Assad regime. Most church leaders accept the fact that there is some routine surveillance of activities on church premises, including the teaching etc. They effectively exercise self-censorship by avoiding provocative or inflammatory messaging, for example about evangelizing Muslims or speaking about Islam in a derogatory way. Also, the Ministry of Islamic Endowment was empowered to approve Christian books that can be sold publicly. This ministry, in collaboration with the Ministry of Education, supervises the curriculum for Christian schools in Syria as well. Finally, there is no space for any sort of public Christian teaching in Islamist-held areas.
- ***Activities of churches have been monitored, hindered, disturbed, or obstructed (Block 5.1 / Score: 3.5 points):*** This pressure applies primarily in opposition-held areas controlled by Islamist groups, in which most (if not all) churches have ceased to function or have been desecrated over the course of the ongoing conflict. Within government-controlled areas, there is understood to be a routine monitoring of church activities, ostensibly for the protection of churches. However such monitoring could be used against churches if provocative messages or activities were detected. Most pressure is on church groups of converts, though the pressure is somewhat less in Kurdish areas, with the exception of the zone currently occupied by Turkish forces.
- ***Churches have been hindered from organizing Christian activities outside church buildings (Block 5.5 / Score: 3.5 points):*** Generally, churches refrain from organizing Christian worship or outreach activities outside church buildings because of the expectation of negative consequences were they to do so. They therefore effectively exercise self-censorship in this regard. However, informal gatherings of Christians within private places other than officially recognized church buildings have probably become far more frequent than in the pre-conflict period - especially in areas where church buildings cannot be used because of restrictions (in some opposition-held areas) or because of war damage. In areas held by Islamic militant groups, it is forbidden to hold activities outside of churches. Converts cannot openly organize Christian activities outside churches.
- ***Churches have been hindered from openly integrating converts (Block 5.7 / Score: 3.5 points):*** The incorporation of converts within recognized churches has always been discouraged in Syria on the grounds that this could produce religious sectarianism or provoke conflict between communities. Also, it could potentially be a ground for criminal prosecution. Non-traditional church groups generally have a more open attitude towards converts. In areas held by Islamist opposition groups, openly integrating converts in churches would be unthinkable and very dangerous .

In areas controlled by radical Islamic groups most churches have either been demolished or are used as Islamic centers. Public expressions of Christian faith are prohibited and church buildings or monasteries cannot be repaired or restored irrespective of whether the damage was collateral or intentional. In government-controlled areas, there was less monitoring of Christians due to the circumstances of war but this is changing as the Syrian government gains power. In the entire country, marriages of Christians with a Muslim background are impossible and as such illegal.

Violence

The following table is based on reported cases as much as possible. Since many incidents go unreported, the numbers below must be understood as being minimum figures. In cases where it has been impossible to count exactly, a symbolic round figure (10, 100 or 1000) is given. (A symbolic number of 10 could in reality even be 100 or more but the real number is uncertain. A symbolic number of 100 could go well over 1000 but the real number is uncertain. A symbolic number of 1000 could go well over 10,000 but, again, the real number is uncertain.) In cases where it is clear that (many) more Christians are affected, but a concrete number could be given according to the number of incidents reported, the number given has to be understood as being an absolutely minimum figure.

Syria	Reporting period	Christians killed	Christians attacked	Christians arrested	Churches attacked	Christian-owned houses and shops attacked
WWL 2020	01 Nov 2018 - 31 Oct 2019	10	55	2	5	450
WWL 2019	01 Nov 2017 - 31 Oct 2018	14	75	0	7	160
WWL 2018	01 Nov 2016 - 31 Oct 2017	0	26	0	1	10

Christians killed refers to the number of Christians killed for faith-related reasons (including state-sanctioned executions). Christians attacked refers to the number of Christians abducted, raped or otherwise sexually harassed, forced into marriage to non-Christians or otherwise physically or mentally abused (including beatings and death-threats) for faith-related reasons. Christians arrested refers to the number of Christians detained without trial or sentenced to jail, labor camp, sent to psychiatric hospital as punishment or similar things for faith-related reasons. Churches attacked refers to the number of churches or Christian buildings (schools, hospitals, cemeteries, etc.) attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down, closed or confiscated for faith-related reasons. Christian-owned houses and shops attacked refers to the number of houses of Christians or other property (including shops and businesses of Christians) attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down, closed or confiscated for faith-related reasons.

Disclaimer: In the chaotic circumstances of war it is often not clear whether incidents are religiously motivated or not. Incidents where Christians were harmed or Christian owned property was damaged in fighting between government and rebel forces which could be considered "collateral damage" were generally not included. Motives for attacks are mixed and include power mechanisms. However, this does not necessarily rule out anti-Christian motivation. For WWL analysis, cases have only been included i) where it was clear to perpetrators in advance that Christian civilians would be affected (e.g. where a majority Christian town was attacked); and ii) where the local Christian community believed that those responsible were acting out of specific anti-Christian motivation through their adherence to anti-Christian ideology (for instance Hayaat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) or other violent Islamic militants).

- **Christians killed:** At least 10 Christians were killed for faith-related reasons. Examples are listed above under "Specific incidents of persecution".
- **Churches attacked:** Besides a car bomb attack in Qamishli (see above under "Specific incidents of persecution"), a church used by converts was closed, a Christian ministry center was closed, and at least one church was desecrated by Turkish-backed militias.
- **Christians attacked:** As an example, in the above mentioned attack on the church in Qamishli, 11 civilians were injured according to state media.
- **Christians arrested:** One example was the arrest of a convert from Islam after his testimony had been published.
- **Christian homes/shops attacked:** For examples, see above under "Specific incidents of persecution"

5 Year trends

Chart 1:

The table below shows how the overall level of pressure on Christians has been at an extremely high level over all five WWL reporting periods. The average pressure now appears to have stabilized at 13.8 points.

WWL 2016 - WWL 2020 Persecution Pattern history: Syria	Average pressure over 5 Spheres of life
2020	13.8
2019	13.8
2018	14.4
2017	14.6
2016	14.3

Chart 2:

The trend for all *spheres of life* is now towards a decrease in pressure, compared to the higher levels in the first few reporting periods. This decrease reflects the shrinking of IS-held territory and of areas held by other Islamic militant groups. However, the levels did increase slightly in WWL 2020 for *Family Life*, *National Life* and *Church Life*, mostly due to more information being available. It is also in these spheres that the level remains extreme.

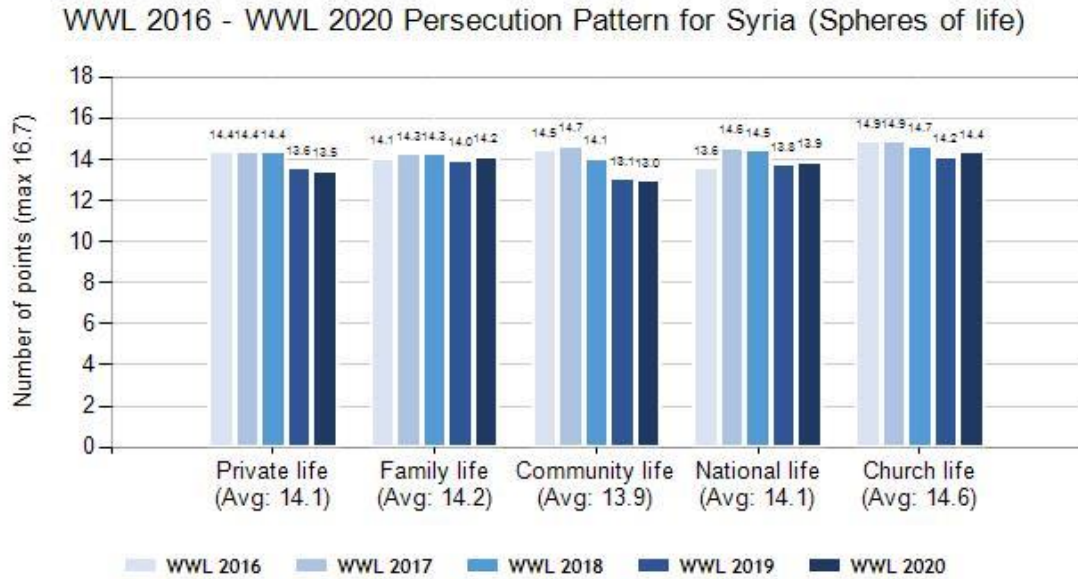
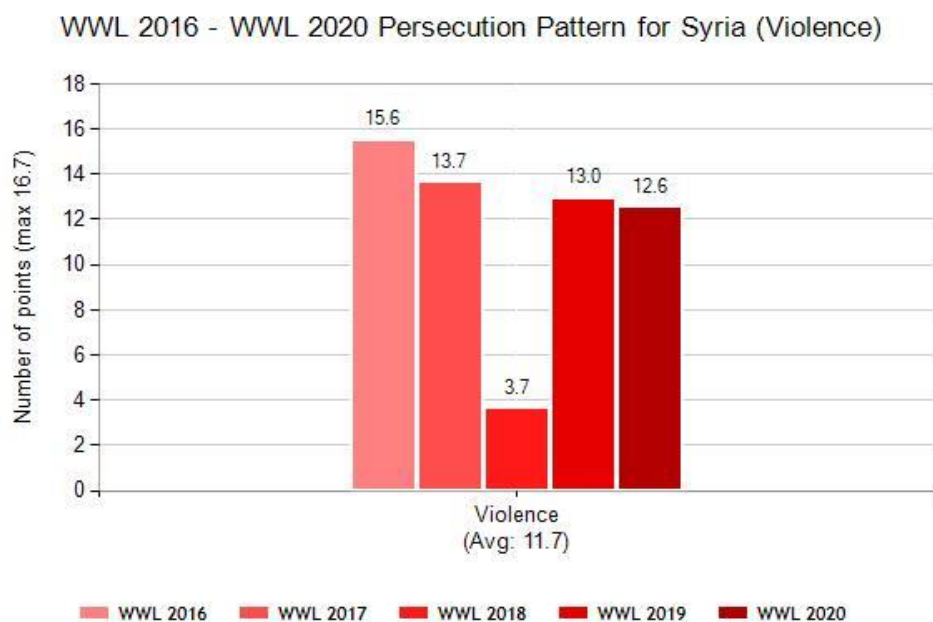


Chart 3:

The scores below show extremely high levels of violence in WWL 2015-WWL 2016 when IS still controlled considerable parts of Syria. This steep fall in WWL 2018 is explained by the fact that fewer violent incidents were reported as the IS-dominated areas shrunk further, and also by the fact that accessing verified information in the chaos of civil war was particularly difficult. (For instance, weeks after WWL 2018 had been published, it became known in October 2017 that IS had killed more than 100 Christians in the [Christian town of al-Qaryatayn](#), which would have led to a higher score in violence.)

The rise in violence to extreme levels again in WWL 2019-WWL 2020 mainly reflects Islamic militant actions against Christians, the confiscation of property in areas where large numbers of Christians live(d) - especially in Idlib Province - and the access to more information.



Gender profile of persecution

Female Pressure Points:

- ***Abduction***
- ***Denied custody of children***
- ***Denied legal ability to marry Christian spouse***
- ***Denied inheritance or possessions***
- ***Economic harassment via work/job/business***
- ***Enforced religious dress code***
- ***Forced divorce***
- ***Forced marriage***
- ***Incarceration by family***
- ***Trafficking***
- ***Violence – death***
- ***Violence – physical***
- ***Violence – sexual***

In a context of war and restrictions on religious freedom, women and girls from religious minority groups, including Christians, risk sexual harassment and rape. This can happen both in government-controlled areas and in rebel-held territory, though the threat is higher in the latter. Although there were also some reports of sexual violence against men and boys, in a situation in which sexual violence against women has become normalized through Islamists' re-introduction of female slavery, women were much more affected by such violent acts. The gang-rape and murder of Armenian Christian Suzan Der Kirkour in July 2019, reported by International Christian Concern, is a recent religiously motivated example.

Not only Islamic militant groups constitute a threat for Christian women and girls. For female converts, violence can come from their own families if their new faith is discovered. Women are particularly vulnerable to the Islamic culture of honor and shame. Leaving Islam is a great taboo and seriously violates family honor. This includes assaults and honor-killing risks. There is little protection from family violence in practice (if not in law) for women and girls in general. Additionally, female converts can be abducted and/or forced to marry Muslims.

For Christians from a Muslim background, pressure would come most commonly from family and community. Such pressure affects women and girl converts most, then younger men and lastly older men, reflecting the levels of status and freedom generally within Islamic culture.

According to Sharia law, a Muslim woman is not allowed to legally marry a Christian man (vice versa is possible). This makes a marriage between a female Christian of Muslim background and a man from other categories of Christian communities legally impossible.

Married female Christian converts married to a Muslim risk divorce, particularly if their conversion becomes known to in-laws. In that case, they are very likely to be excluded from having custody over their children. Although the attitude of the wider family is crucial, there is always a risk of losing custody to relatives as this issue falls under Sharia law which gives all rights to the Muslim spouse. This is also problematic for Christian women married to male Christians of Muslim background, who are still considered Muslims by Sharia law. As a result, it is very hard for female converts and Christian women married to Muslims to raise their children as Christians. Also, a Christian woman married to a Muslim is not entitled to an inheritance from her husband unless she converts to Islam.

Male Pressure Points:

- ***Abduction***
- ***Economic harassment via Work/Job/Business***
- ***Military/militia conscription/service against conscience***
- ***Violence – death***

A common fear among indigenous Christians is that young men will be forcibly conscripted into the Syrian Army (or to other military factions, including YPG or aligned militias). Although this fear is a common one in many Syrian communities (not just Christian communities), some claim that Christians are particularly vulnerable within military structures (e.g. they are deployed at more dangerous positions). In Syria there is enforced military service for all men at the age of 18. Within opposition-held areas there may also be a general pressure to join defense forces or other armed units. Some Christians are conscientious objectors, and this can prompt consideration of emigration.

The persecution of Christian men affects their families considerably, particularly if they are killed or abducted. In Syria's traditional society, males are the main breadwinners and support their families financially. If they lose their jobs or are abducted/killed, the whole family is dependent on external financial support to survive.

The abduction of male church leaders has had a considerable negative impact on Christian communities. Whenever a church leader was abducted or killed, Christian emigration numbers spiked.

Persecution of other religious minorities

Traditionally, Syrian society has been composed of a diverse range of ethnic and religious communities. Many other religious minorities face various levels of persecution in Syria, for instance: Shia, Alewite, Druze, Jews, Yazidis and Zaradashtis.

Shia, Alewite and Druze communities have been marginalized and persecuted by Sunni jihadists, not only on the grounds of their faith being considered heretical, but in the case of the Alewites, also because of their perceived connections with the respective Assad presidents.

Particularly the Druze communities, but also Shia and Alawites, have faced abductions, bombings and killings by IS militants. As part of Syria's anti-Zionist narrative, Jews have been marginalized for most of modern Syria's history. Yazidis and Zaradashtis belong to Kurdish religions which are not recognized by the Syrian regime. Their children are registered as Sunni Muslims and they learn Islam in school. Presumably their situation was harder before the current crisis, as Kurdish forces are now taking control of their areas which gives them more freedom.

Examples of persecution:

- In July 2018 Islamic State militants abducted more than 30 Druze women and children in south-western Syria, according to a [BBC News report](#) on 30 July. The abductions were reported after "a series of suicide bombings that targeted an area dominated by the Druze ethnic minority on 25 July. More than 200 people were killed."
- The [International Religious Freedom Report 2018](#) included the following religious violations against Shia and Ismaili Muslims committed in 2017: "A September COI report noted two explosions in March near the Bab al-Saghir cemetery, a well-known Shia pilgrimage site. The explosions detonated 10 minutes apart in the parking lot of the cemetery, where buses transporting pilgrims were parked. The explosions killed 44 civilians and injured 120, the majority of whom were Iraqi Shia pilgrims. HTS claimed responsibility for the attack. According to the same report, on April 14, a truck bomb exploded in Al-Rashidin near Aleppo, killing evacuees from Fu'ah and Kafraya – two predominantly Shia Muslim towns – who believed the truck would deliver food. The attack killed 95 persons, including 68 children and 13 women, and injured 276, including 42 children and 78 women. Onlookers yelled sectarian insults at the Shia victims. No party claimed responsibility for the attack, and HTS and Ahrar al-Sham explicitly denied involvement. In May ISIS militants attacked the town of Aqarib al-Safiyah and attempted to attack the nearby Al-Manbouja village in Hamah, both predominantly populated by Ismaili Muslims. The attackers killed 52 civilians, the vast majority Ismailis. Survivors reported being verbally insulted by ISIS fighters on account of their religious beliefs."

Future outlook for the church

The outlook for Christians as viewed through the lens of:

- **Islamic oppression:** The territorial defeat of IS in March 2019 naturally means significant liberation for people living in the areas concerned. Nevertheless, this does not necessarily mean that the presence of the Persecution engine *Islamic oppression* will weaken considerably. IS has continued its terror activities – in the Middle East and elsewhere – to show that it is still a relevant factor in world politics. Moreover IS is not the only driver of this engine which is also boosted by jihadist components of the Sunni opposition. For instance, Islamic militants controlling Afrin imposed stricter Islamic law which makes Christians reluctant to return. In addition, if the return of refugees and IDPs is accelerated, as envisaged by current Lebanese Government policy, Christians could be forced to return to areas under the control of Islamic militants where they are vulnerable.

Furthermore, since the Turkish invasion of northeast Syria in October 2019, Christian leaders are concerned, as [Middle East Concern](#) puts it, "that elements within Turkey's forces and their Syrian opposition allies are pursuing Islamist agendas that are hostile not just to Kurds but also to any communities that are not Sunni Muslim. This fear would be compounded if the security of prisons holding extremists is compromised. They also fear that Turkey's refugee repatriation plans, whereby Syrians who fled from other areas would be resettled in northeast Syria, constitute an intentional programme of 'demographic engineering' in the region, intended to boost the Arab Sunni presence to the detriment of Kurds and other communities such as Christians." Land and property belonging to Christians could thereby be stolen and taken over.

Finally there are reports of continued growth in the numbers of converts from Islam to Christianity, which could lead to an increase in incidents of persecution against Christians from an Islamic background.

- **Clan and ethnic antagonism:** The tribal and ethnic identity of rural Syria is an important factor used by the various national and international powers involved in the civil war. As a result, the different tribes have become very fragmented and have even developed into competing clans, which can force people to rely on their own specific tribe even more. In such circumstances, tribal values - mostly based on Islam - offer security and become increasingly important. In the Kurdish areas, ethnicity is an important factor in the struggle between the Turks and the Kurds. Turkish forces taking over the northwestern and mostly Kurdish areas around Afrin in March 2018, reportedly used Sunni jihadist groups to ["eliminate the presence of Kurds and other ethnic and religious minorities along its border"](#). These religious minorities include Christians, most of whom are Armenian and Assyrian. A similar approach would seem to be in operation in the Turkish invasion of northeastern Syria in October 2019.

This strengthening of the Persecution engine *Clan and ethnic antagonism* affects all Christians in the area and will certainly not lessen the pressure families and communities exert on converts - a situation which is not expected to change for the better in the short term.

- **Dictatorial paranoia:** The most important drivers of the Persecution engine *Dictatorial paranoia* are currently the armed opposition groups in areas under their control. With most Islamist groups defeated or pushed into Syria's north-west, the Syrian government has vowed to liberate the strategic north-western town of Idlib. The Turkish forces are also driven by the aim to expand and maintain their power in both the northwest and the northeast of Syria. Security company [Garda World](#), expects fighting to continue "across northern Syria in the coming months as government forces advance into Idlib Province and Turkey-led opposition forces attempt to establish a buffer zone in Kurdish-held territory along the Turkish border." Christians still living in these areas will no doubt be heavily affected by the fighting.

Christians do not currently experience strong monitoring from the side of the Syrian regime as the government is still busy fighting opposition forces. However, as the regime is increasingly reconquers territory this seems to be changing. It is likely that new security measures will be implemented which restrict religious freedom (particularly for converts to Christianity, but also for communities of non-traditional Christians).

In October 2018, President Assad signed into law regulations for the state-control of Islamic teaching and appointments in Syria. The new legislation expands the authority of the Ministry of Religious Endowments (MRE) in a bid to prevent Muslim clerics from taking advantage of religious platforms for political purposes, many of whom are likely to be supporting militant groups opposing the government. The MRE will now have significant influence in the areas of education and law (among others). On the one hand, President Assad would seem to be increasing his control over the Sunni Muslim population, but on the other hand he might be seeking to use Islam to unify the seriously fragmented country. If the latter is the case, this could lead to Christians feeling distinctly unwelcome in Syria in the future.

- **Organized corruption and crime:** The influence of organized crime in the form of ransom for kidnapped Christians seems to have decreased according to in-country researchers. However, it has certainly not disappeared altogether. Even though the number of recorded incidents of abduction has become lower, in a country where corruption is common and where rule of law is lacking in many places, this Persecution engine is not expected to weaken considerably in the foreseeable future.

External Links - WWL 2020: Persecution Dynamics

- Persecution engines: IED - <https://www.britannica.com/technology/improvised-explosive-device>
- Persecution engines: reportedly - <https://cruxnow.com/global-church/2018/03/16/christian-activists-say-militias-target-religious-minorities-in-syria/>
- Geographical hotspots of persecution: - <https://1.bp.blogspot.com/-Hf3ivvpLf24/XU10d9y0m8I/AAAAAAAAAKf0/FrzYcAAqpnIdKyvt6s5rBRtpPRNj0tTxACLcBGAs/s1600/ISW%2BPublication%2B-%2BSyria%2BSITREP%2BMap%2B20190806.jpg>
- 5 Year trends: in the Christian town of al-Qaryatayn - <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/isis-al-qaryatayn-syria-attack-kills-civilians-raqqa-islamic-state-army-revenge-a8014746.html>
- Persecution of other religious minorities: BBC News report - <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-45004063>
- Persecution of other religious minorities: International Religious Freedom Report 2018 - <https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm#wrapper>
- Future outlook for the church: Middle East Concern - <https://www.meconcern.org/2019/10/11/syria-christians-request-prayer-for-northeast-syria/>
- Future outlook for the church: "eliminate the presence of Kurds and other ethnic and religious minorities along its border" - <http://rlprayerbulletin.blogspot.com/2018/03/turkey-in-syria-afrin-falls-christians.html>

- Future outlook for the church: Garda World - <https://www.garda.com/crisis24/country-reports/syria>

Additional reports and articles

WWR in-depth reports

A selection of in-depth reports is available at: <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/reports/> (password: freedom).

Middle East Research: 2016 – 2017

- [Iraq and Syria – The enduring relevance of the church in the Middle East: December 2017](#)
- [Understanding the recent movements of Christians leaving Syria and Iraq: June 2017](#)
- [The role and contribution of Christians in Syria and Iraq – Summary report – April 2016](#)
- [Future role and contribution of Christians in Syria and Iraq – April 2016](#)
- [Historic Relevance of the Church in Syria and Iraq – March 2016](#)
- [Current Relevance of the Church in Syria and Iraq – February 2016](#)

World Watch Monitor news articles

Articles are available at: <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/countries/syria>

Recent country developments

Up-to-date articles are available at: <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/?s=Syria> (password: freedom).